

# AFGHANISTAN AFTER SOVIET MILITARY WITHDRAWAL

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I am a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct professor at the University of California in San Diego. In 1988, I was a Special Advisor to the Undersecretary for Political Affairs in the Department of State. Between 1986-88, I served as a member of the Secretary's Policy Planning staff. In 1985, I was a Special Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asia. Before joining the State Department, I was an assistant professor of Political Science at Columbia University. In 1988 I received the State Department's Superior Honor Award. I have published two books: "The Government of God": Iran's Islamic Republic"; and The Security of Southwest Asia. My articles have appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Die Ziet, Survival, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist, Current History, Problems of Communism, Orbis, and Asian Survey. I am a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

The views expressed in this testimony are my own and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the agencies sponsoring its research. This statement does not derive from any ongoing research at RAND, but is based on my dealings with the Afghan issues over the past ten years.

## **AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE SOVIET MILITARY WITHDRAWAL**

The Soviet withdrawal was a great success for the Afghan resistance. Our contribution to this victory was vital. We followed a reasonable strategy. To bring about Soviet withdrawal we increased the costs of the occupation to the Soviets and were willing to accept a reasonable settlement when and if the Soviets became ready. Finally, after a decade of unsuccessful war, the Soviets withdrew.

The goal of our Afghan policy for the post-withdrawal period should be to replace the Najib government with one which has broad support and is not hostile to our concerns and interests. This objective is widely shared as indicated in recent statements by Senators Humphrey, Bird, Boren and Bradley. Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto and President Bush have defined US and Pakistani objectives in similar terms.

Is this objective achievable? I believe it is. The Najib regime lacks legitimacy because it is widely perceived as having participated in a war against its own people in collusion with an occupying foreign power. The Soviet withdrawal has shifted the balance of power in favor of the mujahedin. At present some 300,000 to 350,000 mujahedin confront 100,000 to 125,000 regime forces. The combination of regime's lack of legitimacy and the shift in the balance of power should over time lead to its overthrow.

Victory's is the mujahedin's to lose. Mistakes and lack of an effective strategy by the mujahedin and their supporters can provide opportunities for the Najib regime--improving its prospects. Since the Soviet withdrawal the mujahedin have not used their advantages effectively and have made a number tactical errors:

- **Political:** after the Soviet military withdrawal, the mujahedin leaders formed an interim government. But this government is narrowly-based. It does not have the support of many key commanders who control forces and territory. It has alienated many educated Afghans because of its stand on important political and social issues. The defects of this interim government has negatively affected the motivation of some commanders to fight--as they perceive themselves to be caught between a government in Kabul that they do not like and one in Peshawar that they do not support. The commanders do not appear to be in a hurry to overthrow the Najib regime. They are waiting for the Peshawar leaders to take their views into account in developing a successor regime in Afghanistan.
- **Military:** the frontal attack against Jalalabad was a major error. The mujahedin were neither armed nor coordinated for conventional war. The timing was also wrong. The attack on Jalalabad started before the fighting season had begun and before an agreement had been reached between the various mujahedin commanders. This meant the government's forces were not under attack in other parts of the country and government

could concentrate on its military resources on the defense of Jalalabad.

- **Treatment of defectors:** in a few instances, the mujahedin have killed or mistreated the regime soldiers and officers who defected to them. This in turn has discouraged defections.

To overcome these tactical problems and ensure victory--i.e., to replace the Najib regime with a government that is representative of the Afghan people--the mujahedin political leaders and their supporters need to make adjustments in policy. A winning strategy much include the following:

- **Broaden the interim government:** The most desirable means for ending the war and building a stable Afghanistan afterwards is to broaden the interim government. This can be done if the mujahedin leaders change the government in ways that would make it acceptable to the key military commanders, Afghanistan's minority communities, Afghan technocrats and supporters of the former king, and representatives of those who currently reside in regime controlled areas.

But whether the mujahedin leaders will prove willing or able to move in this direction is uncertain. The mujahedin leaders have agreed to hold elections in the country within the coming three months. They could use this commitment to convene a representative "constitutional council" to decide the shape of the interim government and the future political system in Afghanistan.

Commanders and other local leaders are likely to favor a federal political structure and a central government which has limited powers. They are also likely to push for the establishment of a powerful parliament. In order for the council to succeed, extensive negotiations must take place between the various elements of the Afghan power structure--with the mujahedin political leaders taking the lead--before the meeting is convened.

Success in broadening the interim government will be very beneficial in getting rid of Najib if he refuses to leave voluntarily: first, it will encourage defections. The Kabul government continues to be factionalized and many currently associated with it will defect under the right circumstances. Second, it will increase dramatically the motivation of military commanders to fight for the overthrow of the Najib regime. The balance of power is favorable to the mujahedin. But over the past several months, some commanders have adopted a wait-and-see attitude in the hope of encouraging the Peshawar leaders to accept power-sharing arrangements. Broadening the base of the government will also make nationwide military coordination easier. It will also help to create a stable Afghanistan after the overthrow of the Najib regime--as it will give all important population elements a stake in the new system.

- **Strangle Regime Centers:** As the case of Jalalabad indicates, frontal assault is not an effective approach in dealing with regime's urban strongholds. Frontal attacks make the mujahedin vulnerable to the enormous fire-power in regime's possession. Conventional style assaults also can cause resentment against the mujahedin by local residents if they suffer casualties in large-scale indiscriminate attacks.

One aim of the mujahedin military strategy ought to be to isolate the regime and increase tension between it and the population. A strategy of incremental strangulation--increasing pressure on cities by blocking roads, keeping airports under attack, conducting special operations against government facilities inside cities and mounting discriminating attacks from the outside--can serve mujahedin's purposes well. To implement a strangulation strategy, mujahedin commander need to improve coordination among themselves. Such a military strategy accompanied by significant steps to broaden the interim government can quicken Najib's demise.

- **Encourage defection:** The mujahedin have not yet developed an adequate strategy to encourage those who are currently part of the regime to defect. During the past several months the mujahedin leaders have treated defectors badly on more than one occasion. The mujahedin need to give much greater emphasis to encouraging defections. They should: a) guarantee the humane treatment of all defectors; and b) enter negotiations with some officials in the Kabul regime about possible role for them in a representative government should they come over to the mujahedin's side.
- **Provide Arms:** The mujahedin continue to need US military support. The Soviets have supplied the regime with considerable amounts of sophisticated equipments: fighter bombers, tanks, missiles, etc. They continue to do so. It costs the Soviets much more to support the regime than it costs Washington to support the mujahedin.
- **Have Patience:** Only four months have passed since the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. This is not a very long time. It took more than two and a half years after our departure from Vietnam for Saigon to fall. The Afghan concept of time is not the same as our own. They are very patient. I believe they will get rid of Najib, but they will do so according to their own calculations and timeframe.

Besides, the Afghans need time to get their political act together. At present the mujahedin are not ready to govern Afghanistan effectively. They have not yet developed broadly acceptable political arrangements for the post-Najib era. Should Najib fall before such arrangements are agreed to, there would be significant risk of conflict among the various mujahedin groups. Such a conflict would not serve Afghan, US or Pakistani interests.

We need to persist, and broaden the mujahedin interim government.

## SOVIET ATTITUDES ON A 'POLITICAL SETTLEMENT'

Moscow's declared posture on Afghanistan consists of the following:

a) a ceasefire between the resistance and the regime; b) discussions between Najib, the mujahedin and other influential Afghans; and c) the establishment of a coalition government--which includes the current regime in Kabul.

The Soviets believe that the establishment of such a coalition government would diminish the magnitude of their defeat and the significance of the mujahedin resistance against them. Such a coalition would also provide Moscow with a lever for retaining influence in Afghanistan.

As it stands the Soviet approach is unrealistic. The mujahedin continue to reject all elements of the Soviet plan. They believe that they can defeat the regime overtime and do not consider Najib or his cohorts to be a legitimate partners for forming a new government. From their own dialogue with the mujahedin the Soviets must know that a coalition government including Najib is unacceptable. Moscow has sought to convince the US and Pakistan--among others--to press the mujahedin to change their attitude. Prudently, we have refused to do so.

We must continue, however, our dialogue with the Soviets on Afghanistan. In such discussions, we should continue to share our assessment that a coalition government is unrealistic; that the best outcome for the Afghans and the region would be the establishment of a representative government in Kabul; and assure Moscow that our own ambitions in Afghanistan are limited and that we would support Afghan nonalignment and--under the right circumstances--even neutrality.

If the military balance shifts in favor of the mujahedin in the weeks ahead and the mujahedin broaden their interim government, Moscow is likely to modify its terms for a political settlement in Afghanistan. But such a change will take place in stages. At first, the Soviets are likely to signal a willingness to dispense with Najib, but will still insist that the PDPA and other institutions nurtured by the Soviets must be included in a subsequent government.

## SOVIET ATTITUDE ON MILITARY ASSISTANCE

In recent months the Soviets have floated the idea of a mutual reduction or termination of the military supplies the United States provides to the resistance and the Soviets provide to the regime. I do not believe we can reach an agreement with the Soviets on this issue for several reasons:

First, the Soviets have left behind considerable stockpiles of equipments and ammunition in Afghanistan. The mujahedin stockpiles are much smaller by comparison. After delivering missiles, bombers, tanks, and other equipment to the regime, Moscow is putting forward the idea of a possible cut-off to both sides.

Second, a fair agreement on arms shipment must be based on a balance in fire-power between the two sides. To meet this criterion before a freeze can begin, the Soviets would have to remove all the Scud missiles, bombers, fighters, tanks, and helicopters that they have given to the regime. Except for a few tanks the resistance forces do not have such weapons. It is unlikely that the Soviets would go along with such a proposal.

## PAKISTANI ATTITUDES

Among the Pakistani objectives in Afghanistan two seem to be the most important: the return of the Afghan refugees and the establishment of friendly government in Kabul. Not surprisingly there are differences of view in Pakistan on how these objectives can be best realized.

Prime Minister Bhutto has expressed her desire for a political settlement in Afghanistan. What she appears to mean is that the Najib regime--Najib and the PDPA--should be replaced by a broadly supported government. She recognizes that without such a broadly supported government most refugees are unlikely to return to Afghanistan.

In supporting the mujahedin, she has resisted calls by some of her countrymen both for Pakistan to recognize the interim government or for Pakistanis to become directly involved in the fighting inside Afghanistan. I believe we can work with her to promote a reasonable outcome in Afghanistan.



Based on her statements in Washington, it appears that Ms. Bhutto rejects negative symmetry under present circumstances. She believes continued military support for the mujahedin is essential to achieve a political settlement. Bhutto knows that the Soviets have stockpiled massive quantities of equipment for the Kabul regime and that a freeze on resupply would work to Najib's advantage.

## KABUL REGIME

At present the views of the Kabul regime on a political settlement are similar to those of the Soviet Union. It would like a ceasefire, followed by negotiations between it and other Afghans for the establishment of a coalition government. At times the regime has sought a dialogue with the Pakistan- and Iran-based mujahedin leaders and the former king, at other times it has sought to engage local commanders in discussions about a possible ceasefire and local autonomy.

The mujahedin leaders continue to view the Kabul regime as illegitimate and a consequence of the Soviet occupation. Although the Afghans yearn for some normalcy, they appear unwilling to accept the Soviet-backed regime as a legitimate partner in a new government.

## PAKISTAN AND THE MUJAHEDIN

Pakistan continues to provide critical support to the mujahedin-- which provides Pakistan some influence over the Afghans. Some in Pakistan would like to use this influence to dominate a post-Najib Afghanistan and fill the vacuum left by the Soviets. Such an approach would not be realistic. Afghan nationalism is on the rise because of successful resistance against the Soviet invasion. Having defeated the Soviets, the Afghans are unlikely to accept domination by Pakistan. Afghanistan's other neighbors would also resist Afghanistan's domination by Pakistan any such Pakistani effort at domination will only delay Najib's overthrow and it will not work in the long term. Prime Minister Bhutto understands this point and knows that if Pakistan overreaches the result might well be a hostile government in Kabul.

Pakistan's influence is greater with the Peshawar political leaders than with the field commanders. Generally, the field commanders are less accessible to and less dependent on Pakistan. Based on my conversation with both mujahedin political leaders and commanders, I believe there is considerable good will towards Pakistan among them. They recognize that in their moment of need, Pakistan stood by them. I believe that a representative Afghan government would seek good relations with Pakistan.